

We have no problems, only difficulties!

*The plight of the world's poor
is made worse by modern economic conditions.
Is this the sort of situation which would have made
Jesus angry, asks Tara d'Souza?*

Two phrases jump out at me when I read *Mark 11,15-19: He drove them all out of the Temple... and Stop turning my Father's house into a market...* Clearly, Jesus was angry. The Temple markets and moneychangers of the time were approved by the Jewish authorities because they provided an important service for pilgrims from distant places. Yet, Jesus drove them out of the Temple. Just why was Jesus so angry?

Perhaps because the economic exchanges in the Temple had become the Important Business of the day. Maybe because this commercial activity had become so much a custom, so normal a part of the Temple, that no one had thought to challenge its centrality or question its true purpose. Most significant, is it possible that those who profited were those who permitted it to flourish?

Jesus Christ's cry in the Temple was a challenge for change. What are the economic and social systems that we need to challenge and change? I have recently returned from a visit to Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. *Caritas'* partners in those countries work with the poorest of the poor, remote communities isolated by lack of access to roads, schools, hospitals and even water.

I sat cross-legged on the wooden floor of the meeting house on stilts in Atsaithong Village in southern Laos and said "Sabaidee" to a gathering of villagers, "Can you tell me about your problems?"

"We have no problems," they replied, "Only difficulties."

For six months of the year, when the rainy season sets in and stocks of rice have run out, families forage in the forests for food. Bamboo shoots, roots, tubers and leaves, fish and small animals become the primary food source. These foods are fresh, natural and rich in protein: they do not pose a problem. The difficulty arises out of the fact that logging companies are swiftly causing those forest resources to dwindle.

Another difficulty: this is also the sowing season. However, food security must come first, so the rice fields must wait. In addition, when the rice is finally sown and harvested, it cannot compete with the highly subsidised imported rice that is now the legacy of globalisation in developing countries.



Caritas Aotearoa has assisted the villagers of Atsaithong, in Laos, to dig two new wells. The villagers are being impoverished by the activities of logging companies, also trying to compete with subsidised rice on world markets

Over the years, the families in Atsaithong have becoming increasingly poor, victims of systems over which they have little control. *Stop turning my Father's house into a market!* Like Christ, should we not become angry?

Caritas' partner in Laos, an NGO called *Cidse Lao*, has assisted the Atsaithong community to build a rice bank, hand dig two wells and set up a primary school. A corner has been turned. The use of the word "difficulty" rather than "problem" reflects the inner strength of the community, its spirit.

Not so in another community, one in Banteay Meanchey Province in northern Cambodia. Here, for people living with AIDS, access to retroviral drugs for their treatment is an ongoing economic struggle. Ten percent of all families have been affected by HIV/AIDS; 200 children in 14 villages have been orphaned. Should we be asking ourselves, viewing the situation through the eyes of Christ: do economic concerns prevail over all other matters in today's world?

I believe Jesus Christ's anger spilled from a well of compassion. The compromising of human dignity by commerce was so deeply offensive that his response is one of passionate outrage. In explanation, a third phrase from John's gospel is especially appealing: *He was speaking of the sanctuary that was His body.* By extrapolation, we are that sanctuary because we are His body. We allow our own dignity to be diminished on every occasion of social injustice and economic neglect. ■

*Tara d'Souza, who is officer in charge of Asian programmes
for Caritas Aotearoa, gave this presentation in the Seatoun parish,
Wellington, the Third Sunday in Lent 2006.*